

University of Montana

## ScholarWorks at University of Montana

---

Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, &  
Professional Papers

Graduate School

---

2005

### Strange flesh

Joe Simonsen

*The University of Montana*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd>

## Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

---

### Recommended Citation

Simonsen, Joe, "Strange flesh" (2005). *Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers*. 3680.

<https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd/3680>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@mso.umt.edu](mailto:scholarworks@mso.umt.edu).



**Maureen and Mike  
MANSFIELD LIBRARY**

The University of  
**Montana**

---

Permission is granted by the author to reproduce this material in its entirety, provided that this material is used for scholarly purposes and is properly cited in published works and reports.

**\*\*Please check "Yes" or "No" and provide signature\*\***

Yes, I grant permission

X

No, I do not grant permission

\_\_\_\_\_

Author's Signature:

*John S. Sorenson*

Date:

5-16-05

Any copying for commercial purposes or financial gain may be undertaken only with the author's explicit consent.

---



# STRANGE FLESH

by

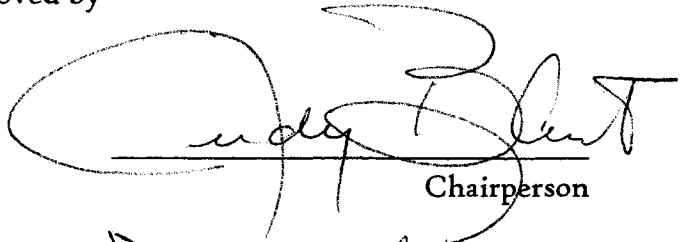
Joe Simonsen

B.A. Concordia College, 2002

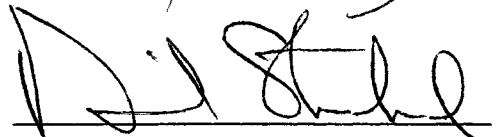
presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts  
University of Montana  
2005

Approved by

A large, stylized handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Andy Blunt". The signature is written over a horizontal line.

Chairperson

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "D. Stuehl". The signature is written over a horizontal line.

Dean, Graduate School

5-25-05

Date

UMI Number: EP34886

All rights reserved

INFORMATION TO ALL USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.



UMI EP34886

Published by ProQuest LLC (2012). Copyright in the Dissertation held by the Author.

Microform Edition © ProQuest LLC.

All rights reserved. This work is protected against unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code



ProQuest LLC.  
789 East Eisenhower Parkway  
P.O. Box 1346  
Ann Arbor, MI 48106 - 1346

## Contents

### I - Poems

Genesis / 3

Entymology / 9

Kristeva Learns the Barnyard / 15

Paternity / 20

Love Songs for Typhoid Mary / 24

### II - Essays

Memoir of a Cyborg / 33

Pretty Good Year / 37

Out of Bondage / 41

A Blind Man Glances / 49

Wait / 50

Notes / 55

And the angels which kept  
not their first estate, but left  
their own habitation...going  
after strange flesh.

-Epistle of Jude 6, 7

I



## Genesis

*Drosophila melanogaster*: fruit fly, geneticist playground. Genes mapped in the manner of science – manipulate, observe. Named for deformities caused in absence. *Bride of Sevenless*, *Hephaestus*. Body's text rewritten.

## Virilizer

I dress with a conscience for him tonight, hair pulled up and pinned with agate. Play the Virgin, mutable earth, breeze conspires with me and leaves drop to touch my hip. With tongue, trace verses on his chest: backward: he will read them reflecting. Having read, writes letters back. What he wouldn't give for dialogue, prefers the polarity, as in, "You're too femme for me to date." The Virilizer gene butches fruit flies and there is no human analogue. Or rather, there is, but I already have: a certain degree of clap, shat blood, worn pads beneath this sarong. Tenacious, and he will not pay to abort this girl. S/he is six, Craig and he calls herself Wendy. Abuses her penis, *you're such a stupid penis, such a dirty thing, go away you dirty penis.* We are weary of jumping rope, we are running out of hangers. Wish list: hit me. Flush.

## Glass-Bottomed-Boat

Anthony took me as vapid, he hated me to speak and see how I abuse him with this title. "I want to hear you grovel, boy," called abuse from Seattle, de Sade's refusal: he always never whips me. S/he is seven and thankful for *the doctors took out my stitches. Now I am a girl.* Still the memory gives us erections, thin razor hiss, I flow like artesian. Biohazard bag of clits - dull red and sagging by the dumpster. Also discarded: needles, gloves. *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair*, unisex clothing, one boy. Much is lost in the telling, St. Anthony, much is rendered opaque. Fruit flies mutant for Glass-bottomed-boat born clear, larval pulse, the bastard read nothing but faces. What marked us? It's marking us still.

## Pumpless

He demands dry entry, is larger than before and I know by his size he enjoys this. One more way I disappear. Roleplay ended two nosebleeds back, safeword swallowed in the trickle, I have toyed with bulimia for this moment: he is so strong now. I cannot but allow him in. Pumpless larvae chew but do not swallow and I envy this: their bodies do not tell them they're starving. I have seen erotic vomiting and know the muscles of the throat; their rebellions. *I cannot take you more: architecture fragile further in.* What is the word for this desire? Safeword is *poodles*. I refuse to cry out *poodles*. Refusal my one strength, I have practiced, muscular in this fashion. The body is peristaltic. He calls me lithe, as though it were accidental.

## Cacophony

Months later I will see him dancing and strip off my shirt, thinner still, these boys could snort lines from the slope of my neck. Sinuous Third World chic: sarong, henna, stiletto boots. He says Do you miss me and Because you turned into a girl. He says Call me. Even *Drosophila* owns a lovesong, calls across carcasses, intricate patterned trill encoded, provided by proteins, his body guarantees a lover. I am weaving love magic for a man with sloe eyes, touch his palm to small of my back - feel how I thrill, my lovely. Lacking Cacophony gene, *Drosophila* only mumbles over filth. *I'm sorry, mom, I know - I've got to be a boy.* Move through the world: with grace and ease.

## Hindsight

It seems some other thing, I have touched too many times.

It seems: recitation is contortion.

Addition: the skin of maggots mutant for Hindsight pulls too tightly, bends them backward. At fourteen, learned how to cut at her body herself, scrawling graffiti, artists cannot resist.

Once he was Jewish, pinning me bent-kneed to the wall and he fucked me in a forgettable way but: I remember desire. Chest hair crawling across my shoulder blades, poised at the lip, all six points of a pendant touched our skin. That is all.

Addition: wanted me to moan the Catholic Act of Contrition.

Addition: *There would have been a lake...There would have been a fire opal dissolving within a ripple-ringed pool...stinging red, smarting pink, a sigh, a wincing child.*

The text? I am heartily sorry for having offended Thee. I know my sins have wounded Thy tender heart. O my Jesus, forget and forgive what I have been.

I reconstruct it that this one might read and ache for me. Though it recites with greater heat in Latin. Or, should he prefer, Hebrew. It is never glossolalia as we speak it.

It seems: a bow is strung in this manner - infinite set of lines intersect the arc and only one aims true.

## Entymology

The Portuguese Man O' War is not one creature. Four organisms seek each other blindly, cohere. Colonial: stomach, tentacles, gonads, float. Which is to say, some creatures are wholly tentacles.

## A Jellyfish

*Praya dubia's* stinging curtains not curtains  
but polyp colonies. Colonies not colonies, polyps,  
polyps – creatures gathering bodies. And they are  
not creatures, do not gather. This twines round  
my thigh. This blind, tender. Controlling  
only vertical motion. Do not resist, resist  
no more than, eddies. Mother's father trolled  
these waters, net passing through  
ethereal bodies. Egg-horsed, he runs  
with gods' blessing. Children misremember.  
Show him winged at foot. Re-member: embody  
again. Mis-re-member: embody again incorrectly.  
Misre-member: embody grace. Cast  
your syntactical net: it bifurcates. Clots.



## Stung

The radial arms<sup>1</sup> of a siphonophore<sup>2</sup> are lined with pressurized cnidocytes.<sup>3</sup> Mechanical or chemical stimulation<sup>4</sup> of the cnidocil<sup>5</sup> surrounding the cnidocyte<sup>6</sup> triggers a calcium-mediated bioelectric signal<sup>7</sup> that releases the operculum.<sup>8</sup> The pressure ejects a barbed nematocyst<sup>9</sup> into the prey,<sup>10</sup> where catecholamines<sup>11</sup> are expressed and deposited<sup>12</sup> into the microvasculature of the dermal tissue<sup>13</sup> and absorbed into the systemic circulation.<sup>14</sup> The catecholamines<sup>15</sup> cause sodium and calcium transport abnormalities, disrupt cellular membranes, and act as a direct toxin on the nervous tissue.<sup>16</sup> The cnidocytes<sup>17</sup> are under an internal hydrostatic pressure of 150 atm,<sup>18</sup> capable of a penetration force of 20-33 kilopascals<sup>19</sup> and an acceleration force of 40,000 G.<sup>20</sup> While the amount of toxin expressed by a single cnidocyte is minimal,<sup>21</sup> the prey's efforts to detach itself<sup>22</sup> trigger further cnidocytes, resulting in the discharge of several thousand nematocysts<sup>23</sup> and their cumulative effect paralyzes or kills the prey<sup>24</sup> which is then moved<sup>25</sup> to the oral/anal orifice.<sup>26</sup> The stinging curtains<sup>27</sup> of *P. dubia*<sup>28</sup> can measure over 50 meters in length<sup>29</sup> and trail blindly in the currents.<sup>30</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> The tentacles

<sup>2</sup> of this jellyfish

<sup>3</sup> have thousands of stinging cells.

<sup>4</sup> Touching

<sup>5</sup> the tiny hairs

<sup>6</sup> around a stinging cell

<sup>7</sup> makes

<sup>8</sup> the lid over the stinger pop open.

<sup>9</sup> The stinger forces

<sup>10</sup> into you

<sup>11</sup> and the poison

<sup>12</sup> floods

<sup>13</sup> under your skin,

<sup>14</sup> where it enters your bloodstream.

<sup>15</sup> The poison

<sup>16</sup> slows your breathing, stops your heart.

<sup>17</sup> Stinging cells

<sup>18</sup> are strong

<sup>19</sup> enough to puncture fish scales,

<sup>20</sup> short shrift of skin.

<sup>21</sup> Lone cell is weak,

<sup>22</sup> you pluck at tentacles panting, pull them off,

<sup>23</sup> escape will poison more

<sup>24</sup> and you will die

<sup>25</sup> to no end -

<sup>26</sup> it cannot eat you.

<sup>27</sup> The tentacles

<sup>28</sup> of your jellyfish

<sup>29</sup> are longer than a blue whale

<sup>30</sup> and it does not know you exist.

## My Pastor

I am twelve and he speaks to me in Greek. Εὐνοια: God-thought. Hand on my shoulder, he names me 'homosexual.' His hand large as a cap. Speaks of sheets, spears: Hebrew riddles easily solved. Homosexual. Vulgar Greek and Latin hybrid. *Homo*: human in Latin. *Sexualis*: babbling in Greek. (Bar bar bar). Covers my eyes to pray, prays for a sign. God's hand to write Aramaic, I am mad as Nebuchadnezzar: ass, grass, etc. His loosened tongue spills echolalia. Arcane as temple shrouds, embroidered prophet birds heavied with sustaining syllables. Link between syllable and sybil false etymology, simplest worst most sinister: gauche: corrie: fag. Rapture. From Latin's *rapere*: to rape. My body opens, a single eye.

## And I Was Not There

I stayed with Avis through the blizzard, split ash and cedar, she was widowed, bent by politics, horses. She is one of us though I am sixteen, Basque. We have both lived through a depression – landscape bare but for suicides. I cannot see causalities, she can see but not explain, efficient sources eluded us and everything moves. Blizzards like deserts, fluid geographies, wake to new terrain. Currents themselves invisible but in retrospect, dye. Con-sequence: before this: this, and this. “I can’t help but think he would still be alive if I hadn’t taken that trip to Idaho.” Breadcrumbs she trails, I cannot trace the path to this spoon clinks against teacup causing it to shatter, hidden flaw and impossible variables: angle, force, temperature, weight. She cannot admit all potentials, I can but prefer not to see, order observed in ignoring, sense an accident in peripheral.

## To See

He was tall, a fireman, he stood at the foot of the bed wearing sacred undergarments. "Do you like what you see?" I was tied and could not touch: the light playing swells, so little skin between us. His name was Joe - we called it to each other, complement and mirror. Below 500 fathoms, animals are principal sources of light, red no different from black. Say he is mixed-blood; say he pulsed, old star, medusa unexpectedly firm beneath translucent flesh. Distinction between eyes and light-sensing organs, one of convention; legally blind and *dubia*, one of courtesy. Reds filtered first, weakest of colors they cannot effectively penetrate. Allowed oral and anal, he would not kiss or open his eyes. Squinting, I looked like a small-breasted girl, vague outline and feeling of warmth.

## Kristeva Learns the Barnyard

What was part of the body and is no more.  
My nose bleeds – what of me leaks out?  
Julia Kristeva: *These body fluids, this  
defilement, this shit are what life withstands,  
hardly and with difficulty.*

## The Cow Says: Viscera

Mother whispers prolapsed cows: heifers birthing calves too broad cannot understand the loss, continue their push. Uterus folding out to bearable emptiness. Qualifications: child-thin arms. Hysterectomy scar marking new biography. She gathered the balloon. Turning shirtsleeves, kneading dough. Schoolchildren know - we see the Great Wall from space, tracing the body's curve. Uterus neither wants connecting, wall of muscle belonging to both. Brace against the other, two-hour pressure, only mother has patience for this. When gone, she will sew her vagina: upholstery needle, catgut.

## The Ewe Says: Fluids

Grandfather stitched the udder, bag-balm slicking hands, he curses her in glottal language: she is always kicking his face. Scolds her in German, tongue he lost at War, mother is Basque and he forgives me. Blood, milk, warm and sopping the towels, I carry her scabs on my skin. The Maginot Line failed only in practice, only once, this ewe is rank: crawls fences each third day. Cries muffled with lockjaw, blood-rusted wire. Mother stands apart, carries warm water and Lysol, hums an aria. Perhaps Wagner, perhaps *Mild und leise*.

## The Sow Says: Bodies

Speak in cipher, thusly. Feral sow will eat her young, careless sow smother. She carves a delicate barrow, wore gloves to burn the bodies: Iron Curtain mercurial, plaid, pocketful of handkerchiefs she presses, folds, pulls down. Kicks the sow biting at her leg, they are small in the bucket – curled to each other as commas. Franco Nero's low-light sheen, in *Camelot* he hisses: *swine*. So many words that taste of him. Cupping a man to his chest: *Live*. His lips, so close to the ear. I gave her this silence: touching breasts. Queens are always code. She eats; Catherine grew fat in this fashion. Guinevere always transparent, standing in. We are draped with infecund loves. Say: it is heavy. Say: I am too much filled.



## The Hen Says: Severed Limbs

Mother piles their heads, dark eyes blinking singly, she is efficient with the blade and beaks click shut, mute, surprised by deftness. Slice the knee and break, she is not so sentimental. Dogs eating heads like silent Jezebels. I loved him for stoning Israeli tanks, she was unimpressed, has snapped too many bodies to love in theory. Such as: bloodline. Such as: contractual. Such as: neighbor as: thyself. Mother's-blood courses through fetus and Sarah might have loved Ishmael but that fucking snapping, she kissed my open wounds like dogs lapped blood from cobblestone. Walls of Jericho crumbled as Sarah's children cried. I cannot account for rhetorical people pinned by rhetorical stones.

## Paternity

Certain species of paramecia have 28 sexes. Which are not fixed – they change with dusk. Even sexed, they reproduce by division. Cells, in their desire, calling the only name they know:

I.  
I. I.

## Limitations

Teaching Confirmation, he says their baths are filled of feces. They spread their cancer and this is a style of apocalypse. Every lipsticked mirror heralds. After, he cautions: you are adopted, effete. You love your mother, perhaps, too much. Their lovers are pesticides, carcinogenic. The land remembers, cries out. This is not so foolish. Bodies contain a prophecy – cells are counting. Remembering: here, it is finished; we give you no more daughters. Cancer cells abandon generations, refuse remembering lineage and this is the style of immortals. To have only fathers. To the woman's tumor grows though she is dead. To wrestle the angel who touches me here, springing from head and thigh. I have sutured your matrical calves. I have washed my feet – must I soil them again?

## Conjugations

New prayer, repeat and see: I set  
as a seal on your arm. This trample of cleats  
bruises in swan-shapes. Helical salvation history.  
Exodus Ministries: twenty-five dollars and Blair  
runs hands through my hair - *This has to go.*  
Teaches me rugby, *butch up, boy, and pray*, rewards  
success with touch. Pavlovian. Do it again, your  
laying on of hands. Now we are one body, suited  
in cups; blood calls blood across. Also vomiting:  
my father: *Why are you telling me this?* I safely love  
your absolution, Christ grants us this at least:  
*Lacrymaria olor*. Melts into its mate, emerges  
new. It can be done: again. Blair sired  
five children, none mine - we touch to repair.

## Divisions

What of children. I can adopt. Father: *God, I hope not*, retches. Do you regret your purchase? I was an expensive child and could not be returned. No secrets: what did you pay to take me home? Daddy's little whore, little Absalom. Clutch my hair, your right hand cuts. It is like castration; your dumbstruck sperm. My brother is seventeen, making an uncle of me. Faced with no mate, *olor* divides. It can fuck itself. This, too, is rare - so few are fit. Most likely divides and again, continues until it can no more. Dies amongst its motherless get. Offspring scuffle while eating its body. Cicatrical savior: eat, o friends, and drink.

## Love Songs for Typhoid Mary

Military pilots see sprites, pixies, trolls.  
Whimsical light displays above the clouds.  
For years, they told no one – these are,  
perhaps, hallmarks of the unsettled.

## Hepatitis A

I traded my cherry to Hep A for thirty seconds of sweat. Straddled him, moon-glazed, looking to see: man made of shoulders behind sunken chest. He was the man who pulled my grandfather's body from this bed, called the time. I hover over, even naked he wears an orange jumpsuit, even whispering speaks over sirens. Trust the ripping, point of contact. It was sprites brought down Spaceshuttle Colombia, the space between layered with impossibly thin transparencies rippling, distorting, sly translators and their inscrutable motives: Virgins always get backstage, no matter what they've got to say.

## Hepatitis B

Hep B taught me to watch for sylvanshine – a trick the firs had learned, taking, returning our light as frost. Needlepoint splitting particles, waves. Two lines intersect at Why – Because of, So that. I look to ends, he was a means man. 47: he could afford nostalgia. Almost made one person but that I did all the breathing in, he the breathing out. Freudian bisexual, Janus saw both lines' set. Press his back to mine, we nearly turn. Press me in two dimensions: he would loom. My razor's edge body pocketable, drawing pips to thigh. A palmful of stars. I throw them like dice: repeatedly. Elves were always cold: knifeblade-pure, cut thin architectural lines. His geomancing flesh: elbow's obtuse angle. Parabola of hand.



## Hepatitis C

Hep C and I studied religion, coaxed him into a threesome. Seminarian: we could lick his wounds. Halve him like apples. His chest's tattoo, stippled with sewing machine needle: Bic blue cross and barbed wire. Insistent jabbing. We entered, a green shaft flashed between. She could have kissed me if she wanted, if I let her. On the wire, lists of dead. God's mouth holds words invoking eschatons. Waiting on his pleasure. I envied one of them, want two cocks, three cocks. Six in twin rows down my chest, the bed was that peopled. The spirits of all her abortions have manifested themselves into the furniture in the room. His open maw, tongue quietly clicking.

## Hepatitis D

Hep D prayed for me. Exorcised demons that fluttered, settled back. Black cloud and sulphur faster than camera shutters, eyelids. Mascara'd inside. Palimpsest of eyes. A necklace, a belt. Rosary known by space between beads, Latin hung thick in the air. Link mahogany to mahogany: miserere, enough, miserere. Contractions, he closed space to touch: broad hands on my chest, my hair. *Don't touch me, don't call me that in public.* Done to hurt the other, palm hard on nipple piercing, marking flesh. Blue jets: hailstorm's suppression of lightning. Insidious, the lengths to which they go. Of course we were cruel: foot-soldier gentleness, nursemaid steel.

## Hepatitis E

A favorite aunt gave me *Bridge to Terabithia*,  
saw ball lightning travel. Following hidden  
imperatives through windows, walls. Circling  
the stove. Pale blue sphere, melting  
hair to her face. In the nova. Purpling band  
arcs elegantly over the bridge of her nose, her  
cheekbone. *Boy, what kind of homosexual are you,  
anyway? That's not purple, mary. That color  
up there: is mauve.* I saw Judy Garland's voice  
falter. Men vaulting to stumbling lovers'  
shoulders, I was bird-hollow and lifted by a bare-  
chested daddy. "Just talk it, Judy, we don't care."  
Precarious totems. Lines connecting us: foreign,  
familial. Red-slippered queens singing chorus,  
mockingbird falsetto. Twelve, I am nearly  
castrati: light melody does not topple, his hands  
held my waist. Come to me, bloom, he called  
me little sister, stove-weary star.

## Hepatitis F

A bit of ephemera: will o' the wisps are not,  
in fact, glowing barn owls. Hep F hated  
the space giving rise to northern lights.  
Heterosphere: one layer penetrates  
another, exciting particles. I lay my head  
on his belly, his shirt smelled of spices  
packed for the trip. Sky a rhythmic bell jar  
we saw from inside, the homosphere.  
We named it Dripping of Cream. Named it  
Space Giving Rise to Northern Lights, he  
could not choose. Eyes open in question.  
Answer: unbutton his shirt? Logical flesh  
does not forgive. When did he find  
such keen correctness? *Though I've only stone*  
*eyes to see, pierce stone with the light*  
*of the one.* Hep F was I's favored lover;  
Hep F was I's lover; Hep F was I.

## Hepatitis G

Art of the un-dump. He left me twice  
on the street to circle the block. Opens the car door,  
inches by, he won't park for me  
to reconsider. Updrafts frazzle hailstones until  
they forget their own weight. Resigned to dizzying  
circles, unaware of shaping and once they were  
otherwise: fluid, permeable. Cracking their tiny  
heads in the dark until, above clouds, their  
forgettings cohere into glories. Glowing auras  
surround shadows of mountain cloister. False  
enlightenment: I should be shrinking to fit  
in your palm. Short of breath, this thinner air,  
short feathers and breath of God. I lick sweat  
from his elbow. I am static with mystics; cloud  
of unknowing, dark nights, my body a morsel  
he tongues. Hard nut.

II

## Memoir of a Cyborg

Anyone who has read their horoscope knows that categorizing people under tidy headings is useful for roughly five minutes, after which it becomes a silly game. Anyone who has tried to adequately describe their unique sexuality knows that categories are necessarily imprecise – I’m gay only if I ignore the fulfilling relationships I’ve had with women; straight if I ignore how much I enjoy being buggered; bi if I ignore my recent track record. Even “queer” brings overtones that I’m not entirely comfortable with. As much as possible, I refuse categories of identity. And when that’s not possible, I fall back to a slippery, shifting identity that makes census-takers twitch.

I am a cyborg.

I grew up on a farm in eastern Montana – one hour from the nearest movie-plex, 300 miles from an abortion clinic – adopted by devoutly religious parents who promptly changed my name from Anthony to Joseph. From the patron saint of the lost to the patron saint of enforced celibacy. And from that one moment when I was two people, the boundary-blurring spread. I became a classically-trained pianist who regularly sliced his fingers mending barbed-wire fence; an effete adolescent who could perform basic maintenance on heavy machinery; a budding fashionista in his cousins’ second-hand clothes; a sexual “deviant” who studied religious ethics and narrowly missed joining a monastery.

The prairie itself is at least partially responsible for my border-crossing tendency. To live on the prairie is to be continually at the center of a disc, the horizon casting a circle around you. There are few boundaries – fences washed out every spring, section lines marked by a small limestone pillar and my father’s memory of an old map. It is a place with unlimited opportunities for movement, deceptively barren but filled with fluid potentials. Sharon Butala says, “The great plains are a land for visionaries, they induce visions, they are

themselves visions, the line between fact and dream is so blurred...Sky and land, that is all, and grass, and what Nature leaves bare the human psyche fills.”

I live in a mountain valley now, and it might not be coincidence that here, in this enclosed, claustrophobic landscape, I first met gays and lesbians who insisted on a solid homosexual identity. I don't fit nicely into Missoula's queer community – I'm not urban or rural, not political or private, Christian or pagan, gay or straight, butch or femme, top or bottom. There's no saying whether I even *belong* in the community. I stopped identifying myself as male, and haven't gotten laid since.

How do we tell our stories, if our lives don't follow a coherent path? How do I tell my coming-out story when I've come out three times – once as gay, once as queer, once as a post-sexual cyborg – and anticipate more in the future? Memoir is an attempt to trace a life's narrative from a known beginning to a knowable end, selecting only “relevant” events along the way: erasing a life's incoherencies and border-crossings in order to create a mathematical set. Coming out as gay required that I brush aside past relationships with women as “living a lie;” owning and honoring my past requires that I hold all its contradictions as true, as relevant. When we slip through and between categories, we need a new way of telling our stories, one that is built from contradiction just as our lives are: we need cyborg memoirs.

A cyborg in the broadest sense is a body that is both organic and inorganic, and, according to Donna Haraway, we are all cyborgs. This claim is most evident in people with hip replacements, pacemakers, prosthetic limbs – the organic body augmented with inorganic technology. Our ritual torture of adolescents by “implanting” braces, retainers and headgear is a move toward the cyborg. Haraway's claim is less evident, though still visible, in people with cell phones or beepers attached – an inorganic prosthesis that allows the organic body to transcend distance and whose call must be answered as though it were a bodily need. The



claim that we are all cyborgs becomes more difficult to grasp when the inorganic elements are invisible: no body is, by itself, born a woman, or an American, or a nelly bottom. These identities are not organic – they are formed, manufactured, they don't come as part of the package with skin. They come after the fact and are applied to the organic body, often so seamlessly that they seem to have always been a part of the body. My inorganic identity as a Montanan soon became invisible to me. I didn't notice its addition to my body, in the same way that I learned to see *through* my glasses and ignore their metal frame right in front of my face.

Cyborgs, then, have the ability to take off, replace, update and change their inorganic parts. Headgear is never permanent, and many of us are eternally grateful for this. The effects of the inorganic parts may be lasting, but we toss the parts themselves once they've outlived their usefulness. Cyborg bodies are fluid and have the potential, at least, to radically change – today my body takes on the inorganic identity of “feminine;” tomorrow, my body might take on the identity of “skater punk.” A cyborg memoir must acknowledge the influences of its various inorganic parts. Since a cyborg's experiences are always mediated by inorganic parts, the telling of those experiences cannot be grounded in only the organic body. It must take into account the body's full history.

Cyborgs do not, or do not *just*, reproduce – they also replicate. The inorganic label “Simonsen” did not naturally adhere to my body. It was copied from an original (which was itself a copy) and applied to my organic body. Men are “made,” like cars, not born. Cyborgs are not simply the end result of sexual reproduction; they have many “parents” and are constantly acquiring new ones. A cyborg memoir, then, must extend the notions of family, relationships, intimacy and belonging – it must acknowledge its bastard parentage. The ideas

of Motherland and Catholic priests as “Father” begin to move in this direction, giving weight to relationships outside bloodlines.

Lastly, cyborgs are consummate cross-dressers, performing certain roles and acting the part of being people – which, of course, they are. Taking on an inorganic identity, such as “straight male,” requires the cyborg to perform a specific role that has rules regarding looking, touching, speaking, sitting, and buying in order to be convincing. These roles obviously influence an experience’s tenor – a cyborg performing as a bull dyke will experience *M Butterfly* much differently from a cyborg performing as Jerry Falwell. A cyborg memoir, then, has a tenuous and always-shifting relationship to “objective reality;” it is loyal to “truth,” but a truth that is constantly in quotation marks, ready to be made ironic. A mistruth that is performed ceases to be a mistruth and instead becomes a founding myth – whether George Washington actually chopped the cherry tree is less important than the story’s mythic status, informing what it means to be American. The myth of a Patient Zero who maliciously infected multiple partners with HIV has very real consequences, influencing everything from Trojan sales to romantic relationships to government-funded AIDS research. It’s a powerful myth, regardless of its patent falsehood.

For Haraway, a cyborg is “not afraid of...permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints.” What follows is my re-membering, my own embodiment of a cyborg memoir. It is always open-ended, in a constant state of flux, seeking to rewrite itself through interface with other memoirs in a virtual space beyond the page. My queer aunties rewrote their bodies through genderfuck; this is genrefuck. This is self-replication and auto-erotics and I do not know whose story it is.

## Pretty Good Year

Josh King had red hair and a rich chest voice, and that was all it took for me. I'd gone to the Ranger Lounge with his cousin, who introduced us and gracefully took her leave, probably terribly pleased with herself over successfully pairing up two of the three living homos in Sidney, Montana. Josh bought me drinks and talked about himself for two hours. His parents' divorce; his sister's death; how much he really, really liked pot. I'd heard it all before from his cousin, but I let him ramble. I could have listened to him read from the phone book.

"I'm living in my grandfather's old farmhouse," I told him when he asked why I was back in Sidney. It was a practiced phrase. I'd used it on my college friends, casually mentioning the fireplace and hardwood floors, and they thought it was terribly romantic.

"I know the place," he said. "I've been there before."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I was on the ambulance crew that responded when your grandpa had his stroke. He hemorrhaged, actually. Bled out pretty bad."

Full stop.

It didn't seem so romantic anymore, telling a pretty boy that I live in the house he carted a dead body out of.

My grandfather had died over a year ago during my senior year of college, while we were all home for Thanksgiving. Impeccable timing. Aunt Judy walked over to his house to tell him she was home from Havre, and there he was. Dead. She called

an ambulance and stood on the front steps, waiting. Giving orders and keeping us from going inside, like it was a messy suicide. Grandpa hung himself in the closet and his face is bloated. Grandpa slit his wrists in the bathtub and is wrinkling in a pool of pink. Grandpa drank bleach and vomited his esophagus. It was a little anticlimactic to see the EMTs wheel him out, calm and relatively whole. He wore a dress shirt and boxers, a sock with holes in it. He actually looked pretty good, dead.

In the six months after the funeral, no one had touched Grandpa's house. Leftover liver festered in the refrigerator. Urine stained the bedroom carpet where his bladder had relaxed. Mice nested in the recliner. I moved in.

I took all of his pictures down, because I didn't want to remember him as he had been. I wanted to remember him the way he was now: dead. I was dating a schizophrenic at the time. He held regular conversations with his mother, who had died when he was nine. They were one-sided, and he knew it, but that wasn't the point.

"It's like a phantom limb," he said. "When you lose an arm, you have more to deal with than just re-learning how to pull your pants up. You have to deal with the fact that your arm is and is not there. Because it will keep communicating with you. It will still tell you it's hurting."

Everything I hauled from the house to the junkyard spoke. The ratted curtains Grandpa had stitched and restitched by hand, sloppy pleating in blue thread, and gold, in fishing line. The bathroom's shag carpeting that reluctantly revealed warped linoleum and, lower still, oak pocked by boot nails. Copies of tax forms beginning in

1960, arcane algorithms encoding bullish markets, droughts, his slow recovery after Grandma's death. The root cellar revealed canned tomatoes and horseradish, their lids dated in sharpie marker and tracing a timeline back to 1982 when Grandpa last had strength for spring cleaning. I planted the flowerbeds, refinished the hardwood floors, and set about establishing my relationship with a dead man.

Aunt Judy doesn't visit me.

"Come see what I've done with the place. You'll love it."

"I don't want to talk about it," she says. "You wouldn't understand."

I like to think that I do, though. I live with ghosts. Grandma, who died before I was born. Grandpa, and my father and uncle, and Aunt Judy. Her old Barbie dolls are stashed in my bedroom's cedar chest. Dad's Confirmation picture is stored in the attic beside my uncle's 4-H scrapbook. I bake bread from Grandma's recipe, wear Grandpa's cardigans in the fall. I understand – this house echoes and whispers to me, too. The trick is to answer, and let the dead grow with me.

I've always had a weakness for schizophrenics. I called my old boyfriend and asked him what the Voices sounded like, because I'm pretty sure I have one. A voice like Joan of Arc, who heard St. Catherine in the church bells. I sit on the back porch and hear my grandfather in the mourning doves at dusk.

"We can't go to my house," Josh said. "Want to rent a motel room?" And that should have been my first clue.

But I paused to consider, starved for touch as I was, and declined not because I couldn't afford it, and not because it was a vaguely skanky move, but because I don't like motel pillows. I made him drive out to my house, instead. Ten miles out of town, I remembered.

"I sleep in the master bedroom. I'm taking you back to the bed you pulled my grandfather from."

He was quiet, and I thought he would turn the car around. "I found him in the hallway," he finally said.

Funny, how that threw me. I'd had to piece the clues together – the small cuts on his chest, the broken light fixture on the bed – and invent a picture of my grandfather standing on the bed, changing the light and then collapsing, caught by the feather mattress. But there was suddenly an extra six feet I couldn't account for. Six feet: stumbling, crawling, planting his face in the oak floor.

It doesn't matter, either way. I still feel like I'm sleeping in a chalk outline.

## Out of Bondage

I studied ethics at a Lutheran college, and it was surprising how many other fairies were studying ethics with me. Like we were trying to find a way to justify ourselves. “We lack a sexual ethic,” one of my classmates told me. “You can’t just take the heterosexual ideal and claim it as everyone’s standard. The dynamics of our relationships are too different.” Maybe. But at the time, I was less concerned with the “ethic” part than I was the “sexual.”

I was raised Lutheran Brethren, around people who believed God voted Republican, who were adept at detecting the burning stench of mistruth around others, who taught me that AIDS was God’s judgment upon gay men. I met my first serious boyfriend at that church. We didn’t know it then, of course. I was in the fifth grade, Aaron was in seventh – it would take us years to know it, to name it, to say it out loud. We did back-yard sleepovers, instead, telling ghost stories and staying awake by asking if the other was asleep. We went to summer camp, where we snuck out of chapel to snort Pixie Stix and Smarties until our noses bled purple. We rode together in his father’s rig when Mr. Roth was on weekend hauls. “I’m so glad you’ve got a Christian friend,” Mom said. “Remember, ‘If one falls, his friend can help him up. If two lie down together, they will keep warm.’”

I think she knew, even then. Eastern Montanans have unexpectedly savvy gaydar – it seems that everyone knew before I did. People I meet now wince when they learn I grew up in a small farming community on the Montana prairie. I can see that they’re checking me over for scars. But for all that I came of age amongst bigots, our prejudices weren’t determined by sexual orientation, or race, or religion. Our

boundaries weren't so abstract – we were geographical bigots. We saw two types of people: those with ties to the community, and those without. I was fourth-generation. A history like that answered any questions about who starred in my masturbation fantasies.

My history teacher caught me kissing a boy behind the gym sophomore year. He had taught my dad, had probably caught my dad making out behind the same gym. "Take it somewhere else, Joe," he said. "Like your house, maybe." And that was it. Cliff jerked away and turned, wiping his lips with the back of his hand. Cliff was from Idaho, and didn't last too long at our school. He had neo-Nazi tendencies and we eventually ran him out of town, not so much for his ideology as for spray-painting swastikas on Amy Martinez's door. *Did you really make out with him*, my friends asked, and 'him' meant 'an asshole from Idaho' rather than 'another guy.' Any irony in Cliff's being a queer skinhead was lost in the irony of my calling him a dirty faggot as we beat the shit out of him.

When I started attending Concordia College, Aaron was across the river in Fargo, studying accounting at NDSU. I hadn't seen Aaron in almost two years, but I had no ties to anyone else there, and so I called him and asked if he wanted to rent a movie. I'd forgotten how unattractive he was. When he answered the door, the first thing I noticed was his thick, stumpy neck. It seemed far too short, like he was a startled turtle, unsure of just how far he could safely stick his head out. His pug nose, his acne scars, his crooked teeth. His broad shoulders, his soft brown eyes, his strong



wrists. He reeked of all-American boy – I hoped he was getting blowjobs every night, just on general principle.

“It’s been a while, hasn’t it?” he asked. He pulled me into his house before I could answer and pinned me in a half-Nelson. It was like nothing had changed.

We watched *Dead Poet’s Society*. “Ethan Hawke is such a talented actor,” I said. Aaron furrowed his brow. “Are you gay?” “What?” “I think you are.”

“I think I am, too.” My voice seemed so small.

“Do you want to stay the night?”

After the movie, I asked him for a blanket. “What for?” “So I can sleep on the couch.” “My bed is big enough for two, dumbass.” His bed fits two. When you’re eighteen, you can pop a boner over the Pledge of Allegiance.

..... Nothing happened that night. We slept in our boxers. But I remember waking first the next morning, discovering we had slept so close together we were sharing breath.

Aaron and I didn’t bother exploring the different dynamics of a homosexual relationship. It was understood from the start that I was the bitch, and we were both fine with that. I took my first Women’s Studies class that next semester, and I was initially baffled by feminists. I was a kept woman, and I loved every minute of it. I see now – we probably lasted those two years together only because I wasn’t

interested in challenging his masculine role, because Aaron could squint his eyes and pretend I was a small-breasted woman. But at the time, I was perfectly content with ironing his underwear; picking up his empty beer bottles; cooking nutritious, delicious meals in exchange for his hand on my tricep, pulling me close; my palm curving over his chest as he softly snored.

Our pastor back home found out about us. Pastor Vic was an imposing man, a friendly bully, with a penchant for cornering college students and pushing questions about “how is it between you and Jesus.” And even though I’d been fairly certain since eighth grade that I made Jesus vomit, I would lie, smile and say it was great, conjugal bliss, I wanted to be a missionary in Guatemala and spread the love of Jesus to everyone.

Vic pulled Aaron aside one Sunday during Thanksgiving break. He told Aaron that we were an abomination. He gave him “literature” that Aaron was too unread to know didn’t deserve that name. And he recommended that Aaron drop out of school and join the military.

“Don’t believe it,” I told him. Touched his temple and the small of his side. “Don’t you feel this, how close we are to God when we touch?” “No,” he said. No.

He was in the Air Force by Christmas break, which was when Vic pulled me aside one Sunday. He told me it was a sin to be homosexual, even if I wasn’t having sex anymore. He gave me “literature” that I was too confused to know didn’t deserve that name. And he recommended that I join an Exodus Ministry group, where I could be cured.

The Exodus group met on Monday mornings, and I had to skip French class to attend. There were seven of us, led by a man named Blair, who had been cured by getting a butch haircut, playing football and marrying an obese woman who had babies like clockwork. Blair was hot. I came to group and thought about him posing for Calvin Klein underwear ads. I thought about how hung he must be. I thought about how unfortunate it was that he hunched himself into a fat woman every night, his blue eyes squeezed shut, chest shiny and slick with sweat, tight ass dimpling again and again with each thrust – and then group was over and I could go home to masturbate.

I came to group for Blair, but I stayed for the praying. The praying was intense, there was a lot of praying, and a lot of laying on of hands. No one knows how to put on a show quite like a bunch of evangelical queens. Someone would say, “I feel like Joe really needs our prayers today,” and suddenly fourteen hands were on my body, massaging in the healing power of Jesus. We were ‘Spirit-led,’ which meant that one person mumbled an incomprehensible mix of English and baby-talk while everyone else moaned and whispered, “Yes, Jesus. Oh, Jesus, please yes.” Ray, a forty-something bus driver with wild sex fantasies, usually found a way to rub the love of Jesus into my thigh. I was the youngest by at least fifteen years. We prayed for me a lot.

#### 12 Things I Learned from Exodus Ministries:

- 1) Jesus can love even me
- 2) Ray thinks nipple piercings are hot

- 3) The location of every gloryhole in Fargo/Moorhead
- 4) Being gay is a sin
- 5) Thinking gay thoughts is a sin
- 6) Thinking of thinking gay thoughts is okay
- 7) Divine is going straight to hell, where he will burn with the likes of Adolf Hitler, Salvador Dali, and Peter Tchaikovsky
- 8) Jeff Stryker does straight porn, too
- 9) I have a moral obligation to make babies
- 10) Ayn Rand is a saggy-breasted bitch
- 11) A minor in Women's Studies will make me effeminate
- 12) French professors aren't sympathetic with self-help projects

I wasn't cured, although in all fairness, I wasn't trying very hard. It was a community centered on self-loathing, on talking about how much we enjoyed sex with women to avoid talking about how much we wanted to work each other over, a community that toppled under the weight of our own desire. While I was attending the Exodus group, I was also going down like a drunken sorority girl, becoming a connoisseur of male genitalia. I frequented the bookstores and gloryholes Ray warned me of, and I'm fairly certain it was Ray cured me of my gag reflex (*Yes, Jesus. Oh, Jesus, please yes.*) I whored myself, and all I asked for payment was that my john say I'm attractive before he came. Definitely not cured. Instead, I was convinced that it was silly to search for a sexual ethic. There wasn't one. There was just tonight's trick. Without the bonds of marriage and children, outside the guides of traditional family values, my chances for a long-term, committed relationship looked pretty dismal.

I was home for a cattle branding when I learned that my uncle was having an affair with a married woman. I was bringing the calves through the chute to the branding table. A mind numbing job - wrestle the calf, push it up, wrestle the calf,

push it up – and the first thing I noticed was not the yelling, but that the flow of calves had stopped. It was a face-off. A ridiculous, stereotypical Old West face-off. Dad, jowled and balding, favoring his left hip, gesturing with the razor he used to castrate the bulls. Uncle Jeff, tall and broad, toned from hours of racquetball and a year of wild sex, waving the hot iron so that everyone else jumped back, cussing.

“You got nothing better to do than you got to bust up a perfectly good family?”

Dad barked at Jeff.

“I don’t need some impotent old shit sticking his goddamn nose in my business.”

And then he said it: “God dammit, Jeff, if you wanted a piece of ass, why didn’t you just go up to Billings and find a prostitute?”

This was the champion statement of the heterosexual ethic. Not “you plow your own field and I’ll plow mine,” not an appeal to the honor of being faithful to your wife. Not even “go to the Ranger Lounge and find a prostitute.” No – so long as you cross three counties and do it with a single woman, everything’s fine. It wasn’t a sexual ethic at all. It was a communal one.

“Assholes like you are the reason I can’t go visit my woman friends without people talking. You two watched too much TV.”

And for all that this was the most eloquent I’d ever heard my father, I knew he’d lost. Jeff jeered at Dad’s asinine comment, we all chuckled awkwardly, and the branding resumed. But it wasn’t meant as a condemnation of the television – it was the helpless sputtering of a man who knew exactly what was wrong, but had no idea how it began or how to stop it. An excellent diagnostic sense with zero clinical skill.

I've been in a triad relationship for six months, and we still haven't got a clue. There are no scripts; we're ad libbing like a comedy troupe, discovering there's little so awkwardly funny as a threesome, we laugh from embarrassment. Some days, though, I think we might be worth it. Last night at the local queer club I watched an all-American boy grinding on the dance floor. My partners exchanged nudges, glances. "You're hot for him, aren't you," one asked me. I fumbled my lines.

"Well," the other said, "would it help in your loving when you come home?"

He slid me the car keys, smiled. It's not a sexual ethic at all. But it's a damn good communal one.

## A Blind Man Glances

I met Adam at a cocktail party. He wore Ray-Bans, carried a cane that folded to fit in his coat pocket. His hands were strong and marked and warmed the cold township of my body.

He lifted his glasses when I asked. His left eye had no pupil: a thin brown disc floating in a skim-milk globe. The other eye glass, immobile and impossibly turquoise. A bargain deal, plug for an empty socket. Stones are rolled to close a tomb. In warmer climes. That's right. Heavy – there's no telling what might seep in.

Adam needed to touch my face before we kissed; I needed two Coronas. Approximate symmetry creates quadrants: the face folds in half, and half again: potentially. When copying drawings in art class, trace grids and commit each square to memory. His fingers found out the scar over my left eye, the line of my brows, a pimple. Traced arcs over my parted lips. I breathed to him. A psychiatrist once took me in with a look and said she was sorry for my loss. Perhaps my clothes, my posture, the pen I chewed. "This scar: did it hurt?" So sensitive he felt tattoos.

"That color blue suits you," he said.

"Who told you?" No one. He could feel the heat my shirt reflected, knew it as the cooler end of the spectrum. Likewise my voice and the smell of my sweat – these are the body's color wheel. Wintry shades. The curled arctic fetus of my ear.

He didn't take off his glasses, and I didn't close my eyes. His hands charting a new geography, mapping my torso. Slipping into the clavicle's shadow, running the collarbone's ridge. I understood that he was seeing me, that he was seeing me naked. Leaning back on a Naugahyde couch at the cooler end of the spectrum with thin cheekbones and jutting ribs and my chest radiating blue. I was naked beneath my chinos. I was wondering what remains hidden.

*I'm sitting in the student health center waiting to have my blood drawn for an HIV test. The receptionist is broad, angular in all the right places, and may or may not be cruising me. Any other day and I'd cruise back just to make sure - brief eye contact, look away, look again, slight lopsided smile and then pretend to be utterly engrossed with US magazine - but my head is already too full of lovers today. I'm tracing the lines back: Jeremy, who slept with Daren who lived in Greenwich Village during the 80s. Rich, who came in my mouth without asking and then tried to act surprised, as if a guerilla orgasm just caught him unawares. Josh, who recently had a Hep C scare and confessed to all sorts of stupid needle tricks immediately after fucking me dizzy. There are lines forward, too, strands of hair from Typhoid Mary: Jamie, who held a semi-religious view on sharing bodily fluids and swallowed. Brent, who is the first truly versatile man I've met and who nearly broke me last week trying to fuck and be fucked at the same time - a series of yogic posturings that greatly overestimated my flexibility. And I'll be honest: at the moment, waiting for an overweight woman to prick me, the lines back are much more interesting. Brent is an absolute doll. I like Brent, I might even love him some day, but right now - fuck him.*

*I have a slight fever, scratchy throat and general weakness, all of which are early indications of HIV. I think it's just mono. I hope it's just mono. I think it's absurd when my lifestyle presents such health risks that I can call it "just" mono.*

Drs. Alvin Friedman-Kien and Linda Laubenstein of NYU were the first to see evidence of an epidemic of a very fatal form of cancer, what is known as "gay cancer" now...The overwhelming majority [of cases] have been in young homosexual men, but about 40 cases have been reported in heterosexual men...homosexual women are not affected...One of the most obvious risk factors, say researchers, is the lifestyle of the disease victims...Sex in the gay community has a slightly different connotation than in the straight community. Gays have developed their own meeting places - gay bars - where men make repeated social and sexual contacts...Right now, being a homosexual who lives in New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco or other major cities puts you at the highest risk. After that, the picture is very fuzzy...Unusual illnesses in the gay community are nothing new, and in my next report, we'll review other unconventional diseases plaguing homosexual men.

~ NPR, "All Things Considered"

20 April 1982

Eve became pregnant and gave birth to Cain. She said, With the help of the Lord I have acquired...

~Genesis



*I told this to Lisa. Not at first, but toward the end of our session. Lisa is the HIV counselor here at the health center, and I had to reveal intimate details to her before I could get to the waiting and tracing lines and the anti-climactic pricking. She appeared to be about my age and was far too perky. "Have you been having sex with other men," she asked, with a look that apologized for having to ask the obvious. I wore a sarong and eye shadow today. I was tarted up and I loved her for that look. "Lots," I said. She checked Yes on her risk assessment sheet. Even her check marks were chipper.*

*Lisa wanted to know who was giving it to whom, in which end, and whether we used spermicide. And once she'd made me talk about it in enough detail to spring a boner in my sarong, she gave me sex tips: Put beans in the condom. ("Like kidney beans. That's right.") Use saran-wrap for oral sex. ("An easy household item, and you can still see the penis, which is the best part.") Use a female condom. ("I'm not saying that being on bottom makes you a girl.") I was quite taken by this bubbly little Jackie O, and so I admitted to her that I'm scared shitless. "Well, what are some ways that we can minimize your risk behaviors?" I don't care, I'll sew my asshole shut if I have to, just tell me I'll be okay. "Your mascara's running, honey." Bitch, I love you.*

*I've been tested before, but it was just a formality. Todd was my first lover, back in the days when I didn't even kiss until the second date, and he dragged me to a clinic despite the fact that I was the only eighteen-year-old virgin in the greater metropolitan area. "Get in the habit," he said.*

You should never give blood if:

- ✓ You've ever injected yourself with drugs
- ✓ You've ever worked as a prostitute
- ✓ You're a man who has had sex with another man, even "safe sex" using a condom

- National Blood Service website

The military metaphors used to describe AIDS...are the language of political paranoia, with its characteristic distrust of a pluralistic world: "The invader is tiny, about one sixteen-thousandth the size of the head of a pin. Scouts of the body's immune system, large cells called macrophages, sense the presence of the diminutive foreigner and promptly alert the immune system. It begins to mobilize an array of cells that, among other things, produce antibodies to deal with the threat. Single-mindedly, the AIDS virus ignores many of the blood cells in its path, evades the rapidly advancing defenders and homes in on the master coordinator of the immune system, a helper T cell."

- Susan Sontag

*We went back every six months during our monogamous two-year relationship, back to the same clinic where the same young man attacked me fore and aft with a Roto-Rooter. A sixty-minute wait for results there. One hour to hear the verdict on everything from syphilis to herpes to HIV. And now that it matters, now that I'm getting tested for real, Lisa tells me there's a two-week wait.*

*I told Mom last week about my testing appointment, just as a trial run. I needed to see if I'd have the guts to tell her the results that I knew were coming. "Why didn't you tell me you were using drugs," she asked. Anything to avoid admitting that her son is like that. Even heroin is better than that. She mailed me health insurance brochures. I hadn't considered insurance. I'm anti-insurance and pro-dying, at least in theory. I've been pro-dying ever since my appendix popped at fourteen and I loudly declared through the anesthesia haze that I'd rather have the toxins spread throughout my body than let some fucking hack slice me open and rummage around my bowels. I woke two hours later with four staples and shaved pubes, and I was really pissed off in a vague, non-committal way.*

*Mom involved my Uncle Rick in the trial run. Rick is HIV+, has been for almost seven years but you'd never know it. He has a partner and a gym membership and enough money to traipse across the Mexican border once a year and smuggle back all the pharmaceuticals a Miata can hide. Mom called Rick who called me, and I couldn't pretend with him. It felt cheap and embarrassing. He said I was a dumbass, and I concurred. I feel like I have to speak a different language with Rick.*

In addition to sexual practices, drug use is a large part of the gay subculture. Many gays with immuno-deficiency disease use a variety of recreational drugs, including amyl nitrate or poppers, LSD, and marijuana – drugs used by other groups of people, but with particular frequency in this sub-population...Amyl nitrate, or poppers, are suspected [of spreading the virus] because they are widely used by gays, almost without regard for potential for harm.

~ NPR, "All Things Considered"  
20 April 1982

AIDS is a site at which not only people will die, but desire and pleasure will also die if certain metaphors do not survive.

~ Stuart Hall

When he first told me that he had HIV, I said, "Are you positive?" "Yes, Joe, I'm positive that I'm positive." Certain, sure, I remind myself. Upbeat, or optimistic.

Rick is pro-holistic health – healing from within, the power of upbeat thinking, shit like that. "A problem in the body indicates a problem in the soul," he said. Our bodies try to tell us things about ourselves, they mirror imbalances within. And maybe that's why I'm convinced I'll test positive. I want something to manifest what I'm feeling inside. "Interesting idea," I said. "And yeah, if I do have HIV, it will be my own damn fault, self-destructive behavior, you're right. But I'd never try to sell that idea to someone with leukemia." I hate Deepak Chopra.

"You'll be okay," he said. "Dan and I have been together for three years, and he still tests negative. Even direct contact doesn't necessarily mean transmission. It's not like wet paint – touch it once and you've got it. And if you do test positive, you'll still be okay." "I'm twenty-three," I said. "Well congratulations, birthday boy. It's not a death sentence." "Did you know that the bubonic plague is still around? There are plague areas here in Montana, where prairie dogs cross-contaminate each other and die their little black deaths." "I'd heard. There's a cure for that." "Yeah."

I half-heartedly flirted with a gentleman named Mark at the bar last night. I'd place him somewhere in his forties, but he danced to karaoke with his shirt off and I appreciated that. He looked Slavic.

The first secret you should know about perfect health is that you have to choose it. You can only be as healthy as you think it is possible to be. Perfect health is no mere 5 to 10 percent improvement over good health. It involves a total shift in perspective which makes old age and disease unacceptable.

- Deepak Chopra

I'm angry. I'm angry for being condemned to death by strangers saying, "You deserve to die" and "AIDS is the cure."...Angry while Joseph agonizes over \$8,000 a year for AZT which might keep him alive a little longer and which makes him sicker than the disease he is diagnosed with. Angry as I listen to a man tell me that after changing his will five times he's running out of people to leave things to.

- Queer Nation

*"You're so goddamn pretty," he said, which, I'll be honest, is the most reliable shortcut into my pants. Stroke me like a kitten and see if I don't purr for you. I squeezed his shoulder. "Ooh...how often do you work out?" "Five days a week," he said, and I got up to order another round so I could believe it. The bartender pulled me aside. "I wouldn't do that if I were you. Mark has HIV." "So?" On general principle, I refuse to let that be a reason to lose interest in someone. Valid reasons include poor oral hygiene and ugliness – no one can accuse you of discriminating against ugly people. "So both of you are too drunk to use a condom correctly." Gotcha.*

*The nurse pokes her head around the corner. "JLS?" That's me. "My name is Patty. We're going to take a couple samples of your blood today. Is there something I can call you?" She's giving me an out, a chance for the comfort of anonymity, even though she has drawn my blood a couple times before. I recognize her. She lost some weight. "My name is Joe." She pats my arm. "This won't even take a minute." "And then two weeks to wait." "Two weeks," she agrees. "I've been tracing the lines back..."*

*"You'll be okay, honey." Bitch, I love you.*

Perhaps you have wondered why you lived when others died. Perhaps you feel guilty for surviving when so many perished. You may even wish that you could trade places with someone who died.

~ The Vietnam Veteran's Bible

## Notes

The line “see how I abuse him with this title” in “Glass-Bottomed-Boat” is from Anne Carson’s *The Beauty of the Husband*.

In “Hindsight,” the stanza “There would have been a lake...” is from Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*.

Italicized text in the *Genesis* series relies heavily on various accounts in psychology journals of intersexed children coping with sex-assignment surgery. Except *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair*, which is a Neruda collection I loaned to a gentleman and never got back. Spoils of war.

The following sentences in the *Paternity* series were taken loosely from Song of Songs: “I have washed my feet – must I soil them again?” “I set as a seal on your arm,” “Eat, o friends, and drink.”

“Virgins always get backstage...” in “Hepatitis A” is a lyric from Tori Amos’ “Jackie’s Strength.”

“A palmful of stars. I throw them like dice: repeatedly” in “Hepatitis B” is a lyric from Björk’s “Desired Constellation.”

“The spirits of all her abortions...” in “Hepatitis C” is a lyric from Rickie Lee Jones’ “Howard.”

“Don’t touch me...” in “Hepatitis D” is a lyric from The Books’ “Motherless Bastard.”

“Boy, what kind of homosexual are you, anyway? That’s not purple, mary. That color up there: is mauve” in “Hepatitis E” is from Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America*.

“Though I’ve only stone eyes...” in “Hepatitis F” is a lyric from Niall Munson’s “I, the Gholem.”

“I should be shrinking...” in “Hepatitis G” is a lyric from Stuart Davis’ “The Garden.”